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ABSTRACT

A survey of students of English as a Second Language at the University of South Florida found most ranked listening and/or speaking skills as most important to learn, and reading and writing skills much lower. They also perceived the inverse to be true of teachers. The challenge is to create a curriculum that provides for listening and speaking while motivating students to read and to enjoy writing. Several activities were developed to provide a purpose for using all language skills and minimizing the need to have separate lessons for each. The first is a writing project on culture shock, adapted from one used at another university. It has ten steps including discussion of the concept, preparation of questions, interviews with foreign students, group compilation of results, and creation of a publication. The second project consists of two reports designed to get students to read a newspaper or listen to the news. The reports focus on a news item and a person in the news, and incorporate both summary and commentary. A more complex project is a simulation of job-hunting, involving the teacher's creation of an imaginary company, writing of resumes and cover letters, applicant interviews, and notification of results. (MSE)

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Purpose Produces Proficiency:
Writing-Based Projects for An Integrated Curriculum

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Intensive university-level English as a second language (ESL) courses are primarily designed to prepare foreign students to enter American universities and compete successfully with American students, or perhaps to enable those sent to the U.S. by their companies to conduct business transactions in English. In either case, success depends basically on mastery of listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills in a second language, which is a formidable task for even the brightest student. The importance of reading and writing in a university classroom, combined with a lack of time and overabundance of material to be covered, often causes teachers to emphasize reading and writing to the near-exclusion of listening and speaking. Artifically segmenting the skills into four separate entities for the sake of instruction is neither pedagogically sound nor an efficient use of time. It also often puts the students—who, as will be demonstrated, view listening and speaking as paramount to their second language education—at cross-purposes with the instructor and the curriculum, thereby creating an unhealthy environment for optimum language learning by dampening the student's motivation, a major factor in second language acquisition (Izzo, p. 7). It is not enough to know what students need; what they want and what they perceive their needs to be must also be taken into account.

Consider the following remarks made by university-level ESL students about their difficulties with listening skills: "I can't understand what the other people say to me because they run their words together"; "I can understand you, teacher, but my Calculus teacher speaks so fast"; or "He says his words funny; he sounds like a cowboy." There are few ESL teachers who have not heard the observation: "Whenever I'm with

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my friends and they laugh at a joke, I laugh too; even though I don't understand what they're laughing about, I'm too embarrassed to ask."

Having to speak in a second language often gives students a visibility that they would rather avoid, as witnessed in the following exchanges: "I went into McDonald's and asked for a vanilla milkshake. The person behind the counter kept saying 'Banana?' Finally, I had to point to it"; or "Everyone started to laugh when I asked for a sheet of paper. They thought that I was saying something bad."

Reading would seem to be a passive skill that usually only impacts in an academic situation, as expressed in a common student complaint: "It takes me so long to read assignments for my class that sometimes I give up. I know I could do the work if I had enough time." However, reading pervades all aspects of our lives, a fact made painfully apparent to one ESL student attempting a task most people take for granted: "I went to wash my car and I put in $1. The computer wrote the code and the directions, but I didn't understand it. After a while, there were three cars honking and I had to leave with my car dirty" (Evans, 1985).

Writing... The common perception is that this is one topic that most ESL students do not even care to discuss, much less participate in! An informal survey of ESL students and instructors was conducted at the International Language Institute of the University of South Florida in an attempt to confirm or refute this supposition. The student version asked two basic questions: (1) Place the following English skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) in theiri order of importance; and (2) which skills do teachers think are most important? Of the students surveyed, 70 percent cited listening as the number one or two skill area of importance, and 80 percent named speaking as either number one or two. The figures for reading and writing were dramatically different, however, with 30 percent placing reading in the number one or two category, and only 20 percent answering that writing was of first or second importance.

When asked to identify the skills that teachers deemed most important, the answers were inversely proportional to those given for the previous question. The survey showed that only 30 percent of the students thought teachers saw listening as the number one or two skill. An equal number placed speaking first or second. In contrast, 60 percent of the students thought teachers placed reading as a number one or two skill, and a full 70 percent listed writing as the teachers' number one or two priority.

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The students' perception that teachers place the greatest emphasis on the skills which students see as least important is, of itself, an interesting fact, confirming the original question of the importance given to writing by most students. However, the waters are further muddied by an informal survey given to a small sampling of teachers in which they were asked to rank the importance of listening, speaking, reading, and writing for second-language learners. Their answers paralleled those given by the students concerning importance of skills. Teachers ranked listening and speaking as either number one or two in importance, while reading and writing were ranked as numbers three and four.

An obvious question arising from this data, as informal as it may be, is why students think that teachers see reading and writing as most important when this does not seem to be the case. This goes back to the original observation that listening and speaking are de-emphasized because of the importance of reading and writing in a university classroom. How can this conflict of perceptions be resolved to create a curriculum that will provide for listening and speaking while motivating students to want to read, and most importantly, to take writing off their most-hated subject list?

It is not enough to tell students that writing is important and that they will just have to suffer through it if they want to do well in their university courses. Some will accept that and buckle down, but many will take the attitude that they will worry about it if and when the time comes. A major issue in teaching students to write is the need to make writing a meaningful activity, as vital a part of effective communication as speaking (Peyton, p. 1). In fact, several studies have actually linked speaking and writing by showing that the order of acquisition of almost a dozen structures observed in oral production are virtually identical to the use of the structures in natural writing (Dulay, Burt, and Krashen, p. 211).

This, together with the issue of student motivation, brings us back to the notion of integrated activities which would provide a purpose for using language. From these would come the natural use of the four skills, minimizing the need to have separate, more artificial lessons to cover the skills to be taught. The following are suggestions of short-term and project-length activities which do this, as well as support the notion that purpose produces proficiency.

Cultural Exchange

This is a student-centered writing project first conceived by Carol Taylor of Florida State University for the purpose of gaining district support for the K-12 ESL program in which she was working in 1983 (Taylor, 1985). The concept, which utilizes an interview format for data collection, was applied to an advanced ESL reading and composition class at the University of South Florida with the purpose of reducing culture shock and advancing cultural understanding among the students at the International Language Institute. The universality of the goals, as well as the simplicity of the format, makes for a project easily adapted to most ESL classrooms.

As it was used at the University of South Florida, the project had ten steps:

1. Discussion of culture shock in terms of students' first experiences.
2. Students formed groups to write questions designed to elicit information about culture shock and cultural adjustment from other foreign students.
3. Students categorized questions under topic headings (i.e. first impressions, language problems, society/ family roles, etc.)
4. Students volunteered to work on one topic, which formed new groups according to the topic chosen.
5. Questions concerning their particular topic were compiled by students by surveying each other's original lists of questions.
6. Additional questions were written as deemed necessary by group.
7. Students conducted interviews with several foreign students from other classes, recording the students' countries and responses.
8. Groups reconvened to compile interview results, edit, and evaluate the need for more/fewer questions and/or responses. Additional interviews were conducted as necessary.
9. The final information was typed into computer and a print-out of the data was given to each group for final

proofreading, plus decision-making on the order of the categories in the body of the project.

10. Each group was responsible for either the cover design, acknowledgements, introduction, or table of contents.

Once all the components were prepared, they were printed out on stencils, copies were made, and the elements were collated and stapled. (Stencils were used because they looked better than dittos and were more economical than photocopying.)

The benefits of the project were many. Students were enthusiastically speaking, listening, reading, and—hard as it was to believe—even writing. The decision-making process and responsibility for a quality finished product belonged entirely to the students. The academic skills of classification, proofreading, editing, note-taking, and coherence were the obvious skills practiced; less obvious skills included the ability to express and understand rather abstract notions in a second language, cooperation for a common goal, and presentation of material with an audience in mind—an essential writing skill.

Daily News/People of Interest

The Daily News and People of Interest have several things in common. They are both designed to get students to either read a newspaper (school or city) or listen to the news (radio or television), whichever they feel most comfortable with. The reports, a combination of summary and commentary, are given in oral form in a five-minute presentation, plus in the written form of a one-page paper. As a report is being given, the other students in the class take notes, from which they will each write one good question to be used in an open-note quiz given later. After the student has finished giving the report, the other students are encouraged to ask questions for clarification or for additional information.

The Daily News and People of Interest differ in their content. The first must be a news item no more than three days old. The latter must be a person who has been in the news for any reason in the previous week.

Students volunteer for dates and one report is given each day until all the students have had an opportunity to speak. Then, the topic is changed and the rotation begins again.

The skills involved for both speaker and audience are speaking, listening, reading, writing, summarization, critical analysis, and note-taking. The students become very involved with the topics, which often seem to be chosen because they relate to the speaker's background in some way.

I Need a Job

This activity is a rather involved and lengthy simulation of the activity of job-hunting. For the first step, the teacher creates an imaginary company. For the purpose of illustration, the "Charisma International Clothing Corporation" will be used. The teacher writes all the positions of the company, divided between management and hourly employees, on slips of paper which the students will draw. For example, a class of fifteen students might have five vice-presidents and ten applicants for hourly positions. The positions available in the Charisma International Clothing Corporation might be in the five areas of marketing/sales, accounting/finance, design, public relations, and import/export.

According to the positions that the "applicants" draw, they will make up fictitious résumés stating their qualifications and previous job experience, together with cover letters to the appropriate vice-president. In the meantime, each vice-president will write up the requirements for the available position in his division.

Next, the vice-presidents will interview the applicants (there should be two or three) for their positions, then write up their recommendations for the president (the teacher). The president will call a staff meeting at which the recommendations are all reviewed, and the final decision is made on who should be hired. The vice-presidents are responsible for notifying each applicant in writing of the decision made, and those offered jobs must respond in writing to the vice-president, either accepting or rejecting the offer.

While this activity involves time and careful pre-planning on the part of the instructor, it is clear that the students become totally involved in a process that provides a realistic setting for purposeful use of all skill areas. This simulation, and others which are similarly constructed,

provide a forum for productive and responsive communication in oral as well as written form.

In conclusion, designing lessons which integrate the skill areas of listening, speaking, reading, and writing is not only a more natural and realistic approach to language learning, but also provides that no skill area will be slighted. Furthermore, an integrated curriculum designed to be purposeful can stimulate students to read and write while allowing opportunities to develop the speaking and listening skills which students feel are an essential part of their second language education.

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